

LAWYER SLAM-DUNKS FOR YOUTH

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When Michael Scholl entered the School of Law in 1994, he knew that his studies would take him far in court—but he didn't realize it would be on a basketball court.



Five years into a lucrative law practice that catered to sports professionals and entertainers, Scholl decided that, “I had to stop living for material things and start living for life experiences.” So, more than two years ago, he left the practice to educate poverty-stricken South African youth on and off the basketball court about AIDS and HIV.

Scholl's childhood could not have been more different than the children's he now teaches and coaches. Despite the popularity of NBA players in South Africa, most of Scholl's students had never seen a basketball, let alone dribbled one.

Raised in the East Bay area of California, Scholl was on the fast track to becoming a professional athlete. His high school basketball coach, who was also a district attorney, fostered Scholl's love of not only basketball, but also the law. After high school, Scholl played for two years at the University of California-Sacramento and then transferred to Ohio Wesleyan University, where he led the team to the Division III National Championship. Although he went on to the Denver Nuggets' training camp, and played professional basketball in Portugal for a season, Scholl realized his limitations in the sport.

“While I knew that I could play basketball well, I also knew I wasn't going to be the next Michael Jordan,” he admits.

So, encouraged by his mother, Scholl enrolled in the School of Law, where he was Student Bar Association president during his second year and also established community programs in connection with the late Baltimore activist and delegate Bea Gaddy. Upon graduation, Scholl landed a job at a “Jerry McGuire”-style law firm in Chicago. As an athlete with a law degree, Scholl possessed a unique combination of talents. He not only could recruit athletes, but also could negotiate their contracts.

“As a lawyer, I was able to connect to my clients at a grassroots level, but something was missing,” describes Scholl. After much soul-searching, Scholl concluded that he missed the satisfaction that came from helping others, from serving the community.

Scholl would find his calling half a world away. A college friend, Michael Finley, sponsored a South African student on a school basketball scholarship. The student stayed with Scholl during his time in the United States and shared with him stories and customs of his native country. Scholl also learned some frightening statistics: Of the 45 million people

in South Africa, 4.5 million have AIDS; the most affected age group being young adults 15 to 20 years old.

These statistics affected Scholl so deeply that he visited South Africa for a couple of months in spring 1999. By that summer, he was calling South Africa his home and the young residents of the impoverished settlement Orange Farm, his family.

In South Africa, Scholl became involved with Lovelife, an organization that uses a multifaceted approach—including music, television, radio, karate, dance, sports—to educate young people between the ages of 12 and 17 about HIV and AIDS. Scholl launched Lovelife's first youth center in Orange Farm, located about 15 minutes south of Johannesburg. Although Lovelife uses a variety of methods to disseminate its message, Scholl chose basketball as his way to connect to the students.

“Basketball teaches an aspect of teamwork that allows the children to give maximum effort and see real possibilities for their futures,” says Scholl.

After more than two years in South Africa, Scholl is now a national manager for all eight of the youth centers operated by Lovelife and oversees a staff of 14 coaches who help train future coaches and players.

“This is not just an ‘AIDS kills’ cam-